

Power and powerlessness of the civil society in Hungarian illiberal democracy between 2010–2022

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Abstract: *In the study we examine the pulling, pushing and pulling back factors and events that influenced civil activism in Hungary between 2010–2022, which was the period of the birth of illiberal democracy in the country. We describe – relying on newspaper reports – the most important events and campaigns in the given period and their effectiveness. In Hungary citizenship activity is at a low level, even within Central-Europe. The viability of civil society is decreasing, especially in terms of financing opportunities, legal environment, image of civil sphere and ability to interest representation. We found that between 2010–2022 the presence of grievances as triggers was constant in the country, while the opportunity structures for action narrowed somewhat, but the illiberal Hungarian system is restrictive and not oppressive. There is a way to protest, to act in a different way, and actions do take place, but it is rarely possible to influence decision-makers – mostly in simple matters that affect everyone. However, social movements do not only fight for instrumental goals, but they also mobilise people, build organisations, contribute to self-development, form collective identity and (re)socialise the participants. These are important consequences even if the instrumental goals are not achieved.*

Keywords: *civil activism, illiberal democracy, Hungary*

I. Introduction

The way we live today, many elements of it were achieved by social movements. Some authors refer to our time as a social movement society (Tarrow 2011). Ágh (2016) describes civil society as a defensive society, which, since the En-

lightenment, has protected freedoms first against the state and then against the excesses of the free market. Civil society and social movements still have the function of defence against the excesses of power; at the same time, they also perform other functions. They develop and spread social innovations and they work in many ways to increase the quality of life and social integration.

The participants of social movements are active citizens, civil society in the narrow sense of the world (including trade unions and other interest representation organisations), parties and religious communities as well. These two latter actors are typically not included in the civil society/nonprofit sector,¹ at the same time, their role in social movements was decisive in certain areas and some of them are still involved in social movements today. In the study we examine the advocacy ability of the Hungarian civil society in the period between 2010 and 2022, i.e. the period of the formation and operation of illiberal democracy in Hungary.

The concept of illiberal democracy was first used by Fareed Zakaria (1997). In his interpretation it means that in a given country political freedoms are more strongly guaranteed than civil liberties. Although there are competitive, free elections, freedoms are limited. Based on the degree of illiberalism, countries can be placed on a wide scale.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán used the term illiberal for the first time in 2014 at Tusnádfürdő to describe Hungary's political system. Later he refined what he meant by illiberal democracy and why it was necessary to build it. According to him, liberal democracies were not very successful in serving national interests and protecting community property, which is why the illiberal system had to be built. Later he trivialised the issue, saying that illiberal democracy is when the liberals do not win (hvg.hu 2017). However, the adjective illiberal is apt. Scholars use many other terms² to describe this type of political system, among which the hybrid regime is quite common. The Hungarian system is a moderate one. Civil and political liberties are guaranteed in the formal sense, but in the material sense, as we will see, they suffer more and more damage.

In the article we will present the issues in which Hungarian civil society became active, as well as the results of these activities – or the lack of them. We will analyse the power (powerlessness) of civil society in three dimensions: are there opportunities for actions, do citizens act and are they able to produce an impact with their actions? First of all, we review the international patterns of activism and civil society, and how Hungary fits into this picture.

1 e.g. when Salamon and Anheiner (1999) define the non-profit sector, they exclude from it party politics and religious activity.

2 'semi-dictatorship', 'semi-authoritarianism' or 'elected democracy', 'deconsolidation of democracy', 'democratic backsliding', 'simulated democracy', 'populist democracy', 'selective democracy', 'diminished form of democracy' (Procházka – Cabada 2020)

II. Patterns of civil society and civil activism

In this study we focus on the activities of active citizens and civil society. By the latter, we mean the area of society, groupings and communities that do not belong to the spheres of the family, the state or the market, although they are connected to them by many threads. The institutionalised form of civil society is the non-profit or third sector, but informal groupings outside of it are also part of civil society (Havasi 2020). In Table 1 we have summarised different types of groups of the civil society which can be classified in terms of their goals, communication style and degree of organisation. The division was inspired by the thoughts of Cohen and his co-authors (1992), who rethought the relational system and communicative style of the Lifeworld and the System. In the Habermasian model in modern societies the System – dominated by cognitive-instrumental rationality – ‘colonizes’ the Lifeworld – which is operated by communicative rationality (Habermas 2011). According to Cohen et al (1992), there can be a place for communicative rationality in the world of the System, and the self-limiting radicalism of civil society does not serve to protect against the colonisation of the Lifeworld, but to extend democratisation to the world of the System. Thinking further about these notions, we grouped the actors of civil society and social movements on the basis of whether their goal is to influence the System, influence decision-makers, or whether their activities are primarily aimed at themselves – individual citizens and their groups – in order to help increase their quality of life and social happiness. Both types have formalised actors and ‘informal formations’. System-oriented informal and formal organisations are in the focus of this study, since they aim to influence decision-makers.

Table 1: The structure of civil society

Civil society			
Formal		Informal	
System oriented	Lifeworld oriented	System oriented	Lifeworld oriented
confrontative and lobbying organizations with the following functions, -watchdog, -advocacy -think tank -policy	- service provider -consultant -organizations supporting lifestyle experiments	-ordinary forms of resistance, -protest movements, -system-shaping, history-shaping movements	circles of friends, clubs, voluntary groups, informal communities, neighbourhoods, non-formal forms of social self-organization

Source: own editing

The need to change the world has always characterised human societies and the existence of protest actions and movements goes back a long time. Before the development of civil society and the public sphere, those concerned expressed

their dissatisfaction directly by turning to the local authorities and powers. These actions – in the words of Tarrow (2011) – were parochial, segmented and particular. As a result of the establishment and strengthening of parliaments, the erosion of traditional social bonds, and the routinisation of election meetings, petitions and demonstrations became forms of collective actions addressed to the central government in the 18th century. Modern political actions have become cosmopolitan in the sense that they represent issues and interests that can affect several localities, and the protest forms and tools have become modular, i.e. they can be easily transferred to other locations (Tarrow 2011).

It depends on the culture and the given situation which tools are chosen from the protest repertoire by those involved and which are effective for influencing the authorities. The 2006 and 2012 Eurobarometer research examined what types of actions were considered effective in influencing power in European countries.³ Participation in the elections was considered the most effective tool in the overall sample (almost two-thirds of the respondents indicated it in 2006 and 44% in 2012). Participation in local debates proved to be the second most effective action type in 2012 – chosen by 12% of the respondents (it had not been asked in 2006 yet). There were large differences between the results of different countries. For example, the Danes had an outstanding proportion of trust in their votes cast in the elections, and hardly in the power of strikes and demonstrations, while in Estonia trust in elections was low and relatively strong in the power of internet debates. Hungarian respondents compared to average opinions had more confidence in demonstrations and less in party and trade union membership in 2006. By 2012 these trends were reversed: confidence in the power of demonstrations fell to average levels, while faith in party and trade union membership increased. Belief in the power of petitions and strikes also increased significantly.⁴ The attitudes of Hungarian citizens towards political activism changed a lot in six years. Unfortunately, no new Eurobarometer data are available on this topic, so we cannot determine how the period we examined affected opinions about the tools of political activism.

However, we do have 2015 data on the level of citizen activity, which in part is a question of political/movement activity. In the EU in 2015, 12% of the adult population were active citizens in this sense (i.e. signed a petition, participated in a meeting or otherwise became active in political groups, parties, unions). The French and Swedish societies were at the forefront (24.6–22.1%), while the citizens of Cyprus, Slovakia and Romania were the most passive (2.1– 3.6%), and the level of activity was similarly low in Hungary (4.7%). People with higher incomes and higher education levels were more active (In Hungary, 9% of the most educated and 7.5% of the members of the highest income decile were

3 This was the last time when this question concerning political activism was asked.

4 Own calculation based on: European Commission 2012, European Commission 2015

politically active.)⁵ These results were partly confirmed by the 2017 wave of European Values Surveys (EVS), according to which the same countries' population was the most and least active. On the whole, however, stronger activity emerged in these investigations. The Hungarian results were also similar to the Romanian and Slovakian ones. (See Table 2)

Table 2: Occurrence of political actions in some European countries in 2017 (percentage of participants in the given action type)

political action	total sample	FR	SWE	HU	SK	RO
signing a petition	38,2	67,5	70,6	18,4	38,2	14,3
joining in boycotts	10,3	19	24	2,2	3,8	2,6
attending lawful demonstrations	18	44,3	27,7	10,6	4,7	10,2
joining unofficial strikes	4,9	9,7	2,4	1,3	2	2
belonging to CSO	40,8	38,3	80,7	25	16,6	22,5

Source: own editing based on European Values Surveys 2017 and Eurobarometer 2017 data

Another easily measurable dimension of civic activity is the level of membership in civil society organisations and voluntary work. Hungarian society lags far behind in these issues as well, even compared to some countries in the region such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia. In 2015, for example, organisational membership was 38% in Hungary, compared to 56–66% of the aforementioned countries, and 14% of the population volunteered in Hungary, while this figure was 35.7% in Slovenia and 34.5% in the Czech Republic (Meyer et al 2017). According to EVS (2022) 40.8% of Hungarian respondents belonged to some kind of civil society organisation in 2017, while this number was 47% for the Czechs and 61% for the Slovenians.

There are both inherited and acquired factors behind the low level of civil activism: the historical experience of failed revolutions, the suppression of the civil sphere during the communist era, then disappointment in the change of regime and EU accession, and finally the changing political opportunities and constraints following the illiberal turn. All of these are accompanied by (and not independent of) an extremely materialistic value system, low levels of trust, solidarity and tolerance, and a low risk-taking propensity. According to the World Values Surveys, its citizens emphasise economic and physical security (survival) above the values of self-realisation (tolerance, trust, emphasis on subjective well-being, civic activism and self-expression). Among the European

5 Are you an active citizen? 14/09/2017

countries the Hungarian people emphasise survival values the most – after the citizens of the Orthodox countries, as well as Lithuania and Latvia.⁶

In light of these, there is nothing unnatural in the stable support of the Orbán regime. In fact, perhaps this value system characterising the majority of Hungarian society is the cause (at least in part) of the changes that have taken place in the politics of party (Fidesz) which has been governing for ten years.

III. The viability of the civil sector in Hungary

The Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index (CSOSI)⁷ is prepared by USAID-ICNL every year in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet member states. The Index analyses and assigns scores to seven interrelated dimensions. The scores for the dimensions are averaged to produce an overall sustainability score. The values of the index are between 1 and 7, where the best (most sustainable) value is 1. Hungarian civil society in 2000 belonged to the ‘enhanced’ category in all areas, with the exception of interest representation. The values of the index were below 3 and that of advocacy barely exceeded this value. Since then, the results have been steadily deteriorating, and after 2010 (the year of the change of government) at an extremely strong pace. Looking at the Eastern Central European region by 2020 only in Serbia and Montenegro was the situation of the sector worse than in Hungary (USAID-ICNL 2020). The detailed Hungarian results are shown in Table 3, where the data have been presented every five years for better clarity.

Table 3: Sustainability indicators of the Hungarian civil sector 2000–2020

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
legal environment	1	1,5	1,8	3,1	3,9
organisational capacity	3	3	3	3,5	3,7
financial viability	3	3,4	3,6	4,1	4,6
advocacy	3,2	3,1	3,2	3,9	4,3
service provision	2	2,4	2,7	3,1	3,5
infrastructure	2	2,3	2,7	2,9	3,2
public image	2	2,9	3,3	3,7	4,2

Source: own editing based on USAID-ICNL data

It can be seen from the table that the funding opportunities of the civil sphere, its legal environment, its ability for advocacy and the image of civil society deteriorated particularly during the examined period. What is behind these numbers?

6 The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map- World Values Survey 7 (2022) source: <http://worldvaluessurvey.org>

7 or NGO Sustainability Index

IV. Main events regarding civil advocacy in 2010–2022: government decisions or the lack of them and the responses of civil society

The currently ruling party won a two-thirds electoral victory in 2010 and this majority has been maintained in every election since then. In 2010 the new parliament dominated by the Fidesz party increased the number of the members of the Constitutional Court and it also appointed new members (Szente 2015), as a result of which in the coming period this body made decisions in many cases to the government's liking. When later on the Constitutional Court still objected to certain provisions (e.g. church law,⁸ criminalisation of homelessness⁹), the parliament amended the constitution itself. Some of these (the fourth amendment in 2013¹⁰ and the seventh in 2018¹¹) generated an international outrage and reactions (e.g. the objections of the Venice commission¹²). In these cases, the disputed provisions were withdrawn (e.g. provisions violating the independence of the judiciary¹³). In Hungary the 2020 constitutional amendment (discrimination against LGBTQ people¹⁴) and the change in the adoption rules¹⁵ led to an unsuccessful wave of protests.¹⁶

The National Assembly amended the act on legislation in 2010,¹⁷ so that legislation could be accelerated and thus in 2011 besides the adoption of a new constitution it could successfully amend a further 200 related laws (USAID ICNL 2012). In 2010, following the new media law,¹⁸ the members of the Media Council, which has broad powers, were nominated and elected by the ruling party. Civil protest campaigns were launched in defence of the freedom of press and also due to the changes in the electoral law – unsuccessfully. The demonstrations were organised by a Facebook group (One Million People for the Freedom

8 CCVI of 2011. Act on the right to freedom of conscience and religion, as well as the legal status of churches, religious denominations and religious communities, 6/2013. (III. 1.) Constitutional Court decision

9 The fourth amendment to the Basic Law of Hungary (Magyarország Alaptörvénye) (25. 03. 2013.), amendment of II of 2012 Act on violations, the violation procedure and the violation registration system

10 The fourth amendment to the Basic Law of Hungary (Magyarország Alaptörvénye) (25. 03. 2013.).

11 The seventh amendment to the Basic Law of Hungary (Magyarország Alaptörvénye) (28. 06. 2018.)

12 Velencei Bizottság 2013

13 The fifth amendment to the Basic Law of Hungary (Magyarország Alaptörvénye) (26. 09. 2013.)

14 The ninth amendment to the Basic Law of Hungary (Magyarország Alaptörvénye) (22. 12. 2020.)

15 XCII of 2020 Act on the amendment of certain judicial-related laws

16 24.hu 2020, hu.euronews.com 2020, <https://szabad.ahang.hu/petitions/maradjon-kotelezo-az-orokbefogadok-felkeszito-tanfolyama>

17 CXXX of 2010. Act on legislation

18 CLXXXV of 2010 Act on media services and mass communication,

CIV of 2010 Act on freedom of the press and the basic rules of media content

of the Press in Hungary – Milla¹⁹). Protest actions against the criminalisation of homelessness also failed.

In 2014, due to protests against the planned *internet tax*²⁰ the parliament in the end did not introduce this type of tax (444.hu 2014). The *Sunday shop closure*²¹ introduced in 2014 was withdrawn in the following year as a result of the protests (hvg.hu 2016).

In connection with the wave of *refugees* in 2015, citizens were mobilising to help refugees, demonstrations also took place (Mikecz 2020) and the issue became a dominant topic in public discourse. In the following years the refugee issue became an important basis of reference and a root cause of political actions. In 2020 the court of the European Union established Hungary's violation of the law due to the detention of refugees in the transit zone.²²

Some provisions of the *new land law*²³ of 2015 were annulled by the Constitutional Court following the action of green organisations, but the other disputed parts remained in force.

The situation of *health care* resulted in a protest campaign between 2015 and 2017, led by Mária Sándor, the 'nurse in black' (Bíró 2015). Since then, doctors' wages have been settled, but not the nurses' and today there is a chronic shortage of people in the state health care system.

In 2016 huge demonstrations started because of the centralisation and general situation of *public education*, which have since been revived again and again without any results. The salary of teachers is 63.6% of the average salary of graduates in Hungary, significantly below the European average (Koncsek 2022). The lack of teachers is causing problems in more and more places. According to the PISA surveys, the performance of Hungarian students has been deteriorating over the last decade (Pálos 2022).

In 2017, following the successful *NOLimpia* campaign of the Momentum Movement, the Hungarian Olympic bid was withdrawn (Híradó.hu 2017). Since then, however, the investments planned for the Olympics – which were the reasons for the objections to the Olympics – have been continuously implemented. The Momentum Movement became a party and began to grow quite rapidly.²⁴

19 <https://www.facebook.com/Milla-Hungary-700827700018763/>

20 T/1705. Bill No. CXXII of 2010 on amending certain tax laws and other related laws, as well as the National Tax and Customs Administration (T/1705. számú törvényjavaslat az egyes adótörvények és azokkal összefüggő más törvények, valamint a Nemzeti Adó- és Vámhivatalról szóló 2010. évi CXXII. törvény módosításáról) (pdf) pp. 52. parlament.hu, 2014. október 21. <https://www.parlament.hu/irom40/01705/01705.pdf> (Hozzáférés: 2014. október 23.)

21 CII of 2014 Act on the prohibition of working on Sundays in the retail sector

22 <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2020-05/cp200060hu.pdf>

23 Act CCIV of 2015 on the amendment of certain laws related to the management of state land assets

24 <https://static.valasztas.hu/dyn/pv18/szavossz/hu/orszlist.html>, https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egységben_Magyarorszáért

In 2018 the ‘Slavery Act’²⁵ (which increased the number of overtime hours and introduced a three-year working time frame) triggered a series of large-scale protests that continued into the following year, and quickly turned into a general anti-system protest. It did not achieve any results, although as a consequence a relatively large number of strikes were organised in Hungary in the following year.

In 2018 the ‘aHang’ (the Voice) *campaign platform* and its sister site ‘SzabadaHang’ (The Voice is free) were established. Since then, they have supported and encouraged countless causes.²⁶ An *online protest calendar* was also launched in 2019.²⁷

In the world of *culture and science*, a press campaign against left-wing, liberal artists was launched in 2018. In 2019 the reorganisation of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Fábián-Kolozsi 2019), the new National Core Curriculum (hvg.hu 2020) and the change in the Cultural Act²⁸ triggered protest actions. In connection with the cultural law some successes were achieved, the other protests were completely ineffective.

In 2012 a significant change took place regarding the *Higher Education Act*,²⁹ which was partially modified following the students’ protest actions. In 2017 another amendment to the law was implemented in an attempt to make it impossible for the Central European University (the most prestigious university in the country, linked to the name of George Soros) to operate in Hungary. After protests and legal battles, the university moved to Vienna. In its 2020 judgment the Court of Justice of the European Union found Hungary’s actions in the CEU case to be unlawful.³⁰ The university model transition started in 2018, in the framework of which the state-owned universities became foundations and received significant state assets. The boards of trustees of the foundations were filled with pro-government members. It mostly did not cause protests, except in 2020 in the case of the University of Theater and Film Arts (SZFE). Among the tools of the campaign were the resignations of SZFE teachers, student demonstrations and spectacular actions including a 71-day occupation of the university. Their demands were not met. The FreeSZFE Association was founded, and in its programme to save degrees, former SZFE students completed their studies at

25 Act CXVI of 2018 on the amendment of certain laws related to the organisation of working hours and the minimum rental fee for temporary labour

26 <https://ahang.hu/kampanyok/>, <https://ahang.hu/rolunk/>

27 <https://tuntesek.hu/>

28 Act CXXIV of 2019 on the National Cultural Council, on cultural strategic institutions and on the amendment of certain cultural-related laws

29 E.g. students with a state scholarship are either obliged to work in Hungary for the number of years they received the scholarship, or the support must be repaid.

30 <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2020-10/cp200125hu.pdf>

foreign partner universities. The association became a creative workshop and a training place (freeszfe.hu).

In 2020 there were protests against countless controversial measures related to the COVID-19 emergency.³¹ Due to the state of emergency gatherings were prohibited, so protest actions took the form of petitions or other creative demonstration forms, e.g. online or honking protests from cars (TASZ 2022).

An action group called ‘Stop priority investments!’ was established in 2020,³² which has been active ever since. By then more than 3,000 investments had been declared priority in government decrees. In this case, any legal regulations or legislation that would hinder the implementation of the construction are invalidated (Bodnár 2021). Anti-corruption organisations (K-Monitor, Átlátszó/Transparent, Transparency International) and activists were active in Hungary during the examined period, but they did not succeed in achieving results. According to Transparency International (2022), Hungary globally is considered moderately corrupt, but within the EU Bulgaria was the only member state to perform worse than Hungary in 2021.

In 2018 in order to eliminate the disadvantages of the one-round election system, in some places some candidates stepped back either unilaterally or further to negotiations. Masses of citizens did more, they cast a ‘strategic vote’, i.e. they voted for the most likely opposition candidate. In the local government elections of 2019, a primary election was organised for the post of the mayor of the capital, as a result of which the joint opposition candidate won there, as well as in half of the big cities and also in some smaller towns. They were in several cases civil candidates. Before the 2022 national election, primary elections were held among the opposition candidates with the help of the ‘aHang’ campaign platform and its volunteers. Many citizens also got involved in monitoring the purity of the election. Despite all of this, the parliamentary election did not bring the long-awaited success for the united opposition. One of the reasons for this was that the government managed to convey a communication message regarding the Ukrainian war saying that the government was supporting peace, while the opposition would enter the war.

V. Changes in the structural conditions of civil advocacy

The structural conditions of civil advocacy have already been briefly discussed above (e.g. changes in the composition and role of the Constitutional Court,

31 Act XII of 2020 on the protection against the coronavirus, which created the possibility of governance by decree for an indefinite period of time; 92/2020 on the different rules of the 2020 central budget of Hungary related to the state of emergency. (IV.6.) Government decree that removed the passenger car tax from municipalities, 60 percent freeing up of hospital beds ordered by the Minister of Human Resources, the applicability of Chinese and Russian vaccines, ventilator purchases, mask wearing rules, etc.

32 <https://www.facebook.com/stopkb>

media law), but now we will examine some topics in more details which are of paramount importance.

Legal environment and financial possibilities of CSO-s

In 2011 a new Law on civil society organisations was born,³³ which transformed the system of subsidies. In the new decision-making body – the National Cooperation Fund (Nemzeti Együttműködési Alap) – there are no civil delegates and since then confrontational civil society organisations have not received state support. After another election success in 2014 the government ‘attacked’ the Hungarian organisations managing the ‘Norway Grants to strengthen Hungarian NGOs’: investigations were launched against the organisations involved, and their tax numbers were suspended. The authorities did not establish a violation of the law, but the organisations were discredited, and the concept of ‘Norwegian crime’ entered the public consciousness (Horváth 2016). In the current period there are no programmes financed by Norwegian Grants in Hungary, causing a serious financial loss for the country and the civil sector. The reason for this was that in 2021 the government refused to accept that an applicant considered professionally most suitable by the Brussels office would be entrusted with the management of the civil fund.³⁴

In 2017 the Act on NGOs Supported from Abroad³⁵ prescribed a registration obligation for the organisations concerned, as well as their appearance on a public list and also obliged them to indicate the fact of foreign support in their publications. Greenpeace launched a petition, organised numerous street protests and appealed to the international community – in vain. In 2020 this law was overruled by the Court of Justice of the European Union.³⁶ In 2018 the EU Parliament voted to initiate Article 7 proceedings against Hungary for systematic violations of the EU’s core values in 12 key areas including attacks on civil society (Cuddy 2018).

Public sphere

The space of the public sphere has also narrowed: a media empire supported by the government with huge resources has been created, as well the impartiality of the public service media is being violated, and the members of the Media Authority (NMHH) are government sympathisers. The latter is manifested, among other things, in decisions about frequencies. In 2018 the Hungarian

33 <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2020-06/cp200073hu.pdf>

34 Norvég Külügyminisztérium 2021

35 CLXXV of 2011 Act on the right of association, the legal status of public benefit and the operation and support of civil organisations

36 <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2020-06/cp200073hu.pdf>

Organization of Free Radios had more than 100 member radios, and this number is currently (2022) only 23.³⁷ There were outstanding cases when the NMHH did not allow 'Civil radio' and 'Club radio' to continue using its frequency from 2019 and 2020 respectively, citing repeated infringement of the law (Klubrádió 2019). At the time of writing this study, the same thing is happening to 'Tilos radio' (Klág 2022). The mentioned radios continue to operate in the online space, presumably those who have listened to them until now will presumably continue to do so.

The history of the reorganisation of the Hungarian press market accompanies the examined period. As a first step Mediaworks Hungray Zrt became the owner of a number of national and county newspapers (Híradó.hu 2016). Protests – futile demonstrations at home and abroad – were triggered in 2016 only when the Mediaworks closed Hungary's most widely read daily newspaper 'Népszabadság' (Index.hu 2016, MTI/Origo 2016). The Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), which was established in 2018, won control over 400 media companies that were already pro-government. The transaction was classified as that of national strategic importance, so it was not investigated by the competition or media authorities, and the Constitutional Court did not find it concerning either (Alkotmánybíróság 2020). When the editor-in-chief of the extremely popular index.hu was replaced in 2020, neither demonstrations (Miklósi – Pintér 2020) nor the resignations of Index employees (Index.hu 2020) changed the situation. *Those who left created telex.hu, which operates with crowdfunding (Farkasa 2020). The freedom of the press is also subject to investigation in the rule of law procedure against Hungary.*

Addressing an audience not reached by the independent or opposition media presents a different type of challenge for the public sphere. An attempt by the civil society to respond to the information asymmetry is the 'Print, too!' (Nyomtass te is!) weekly newspaper, which has been operating since 2017. Issues containing independent news are downloaded from the website by activists, and distributed by them printed on two sides of an A/4 sheet. The paper has already reached a thousand villages.³⁸

The accessibility of *data of public interest* and its distribution among the members of society is an important sub-issue of the public sphere. Accessing this data has become more difficult in Hungary. From 2013 it became possible to refuse the release of data if either the request is general or fulfilling this request would make the operation of the data controller impossible. In this case the applicant must make the request more specific. Since 2015 it has become possible for the competent bodies to ask for reimbursement for the answer. The National Data Protection and Freedom of Information Authority has received

37 <http://www.szabadradiok.hu/hu/node/3>

38 <https://www.nyomtasssteis.hu/letoltes/>

numerous complaints, which disputed the basis or amount of the reimbursement and which were often justified (Oroszi 2019). In many cases the court declared that the reimbursement was excessive (TI 2020). Information requested by anti-corruption organisations and politicians (Ákos Hadházy and Bernadett Széll) is published in the independent and opposition press. Throughout 2019 and 2020, 112 and 139 articles reported on data requests of public interest on index.hu and on hvg.hu respectively. The CSO 'Transparent' also operates a public data request page.³⁹

Right of assembly

In connection with the right to assemble, a new law was passed in 2018.⁴⁰ The precedent of which was that the police banned a demonstration in 2014, the scene of which would have been the street in front of the prime minister's house. The decision was later found to be illegal by the European Court of Human Rights (TASZ 2020). The new law allows the police to ban an assembly with more reasons than before, including reasons that allow for subjective consideration. During the COVID emergency a complete ban on gatherings came into effect in Hungary. For this reason, a car demonstration (horning demonstration) was organised, but the participants were fined by the police for traffic violations.

Strikes

Before its victory in 2010 Fidesz strongly supported strikes (Berki 2019), since then, however, the right to strike has been narrowed and the rules of labour law have also reduced the ability of employees to assert their interests in other ways. In terms of organising strikes, it is deterrent that, according to the current regulations, the scope of reinstatement after the unlawful dismissal of an employee has been narrowed. An employee dismissed without just cause may primarily demand compensation from his former employer before the court and cannot expect a full reinstatement (Szabó 2016). Strikes by employees of state-owned entities are made more difficult by the fact that, according to the current rules of the Strike Act employees performing activities that fundamentally affect the population, are supposed to provide sufficient services even during the strike. The amount the services – if not specified by law – must be agreed upon, or, in the absence of an agreement, it will be determined by the court. Sectoral legislation was passed in relation to the post office, public transport and most recently, teachers, which determine the level of sufficiency at 50–66%, which makes the strike almost imperceptible.

³⁹ <https://kimittud.hu/>

⁴⁰ LV of 2018 Act on the right of assembly

Influencing policy decisions

Citizens' ability to influence policy decisions has decreased. The opinions of civil organisations are not taken into account during the creation of legislation, consultation is only formal. From 2014 on it is increasingly common for bills to be submitted by individual representatives, thus completely bypassing the normal consultative and administrative procedures (see USAID ICNL reports). In 2022 one of the demands of the EU in connection with the Article 7 procedure against Hungary is the strengthening of the institution of social consultation. Even if there is a wider space for social consultation, it is another question whether its results will be taken into account by decision-makers. In addition to the mentioned structural changes affecting the possibilities of action, we will go on to examine the effectiveness of civil activism.

IV. The effectiveness of civil activism and the factors affecting it

The common characteristics of the *successful* protest actions in the investigated period in Hungary are that they were *simple matters that directly affected everyone* (whether or not there should be an internet tax or Sunday shop closures). The changes in legislation that *seriously violated the rule of law* and even the *EU Commission also objected to them constitute the other category* (e.g. establishment of administrative courts, the ability to delegate court cases by the president of the National Judicial Office). Many local protest action movements achieved their goal. These were *simple matters affecting everyone locally*, typically investments. It was possible to achieve a policy change just in specific matters (e.g. home nurses' movement).

The *partially successful* cases were *complex and directly affecting many people*, such as the amendment of the cultural law or the higher education law. Partial results were also achieved in the topics of health and public education (also complex cases, directly affecting many people), but compared to the demands and the problems of the area, they are insufficient. The state's reactions are more of a fire-fighting type, they serve to momentarily reduce the tension and tire out those who make the demands. It should be added, however, that solving the problems of these two areas is a serious challenge.

The unsuccessful cases can be divided into four types. The first type involves cases *that directly affect few people*, such as the criminalisation of homelessness, the regulations on NGOs supported from abroad or helping refugees, the reorganisation of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the struggles of the College of Theater and Cinema or Central European University (CEU) from the area of high culture and science. Thanks (also) to the campaign of human rights organisations the Court of Justice of the European Union established Hungary's violation of the law in the CEU case and in the case of civil organisations

supported from abroad, but by then the damage had been done, since the CEU had moved to Vienna, and the organisations supported from abroad suffered moral and financial damage, the analysis of which is beyond the scope of this study. That is why we also classified these cases as unsuccessful. The ‘slave law’ was a *simple case that affected everyone*, and the changes in the media law and media market were a *complex issue that affected everyone*. The common characteristics of these three types of ‘failed’ cases (complex cases affecting everyone, simple cases affecting everyone and local cases affecting everyone) are cases with a *strong economic or political impact and consequences*. In such cases, the Hungarian government never gave in.

There have been *unsuccessful local protest movements that directly affect everyone* in the given locality. Such were the Liget project, the battery factory in Göd, the case of Fundan University, the investments of Buda Castle – also with serious economic and political interests in the background.

The development of protest actions, social movements or even waves of movements are influenced by pull, push and pull back factors. In addition to these, citizen activity is also influenced by more general characteristics, such as the values, education and information of the members of society, the economic and political state of society, movement antecedents and experiences. These factors affect whether protests and waves of protests develop, and if so, with what intensity and by what means.

Pull factors for protests

The pull factors of protest actions include successful or at least enthusiastic mobilisations within the given country and in other countries.

The protests provoked by the Slave Law stimulated other labour actions. In Hungary one or two strikes are organised every year, but in 2019 there were 12 strikes were held,⁴¹ in addition to this, there were also strike threats and strike preparations.

The presence and activity of *organisations supporting citizens’ assertiveness* can be an important motivating factor. ‘Community organising is the work of bringing people together to take action around their common concerns and overcome social injustice.’⁴² In Hungary the first community organising training took place in the training centre of the Civil College Foundation (CKA) in 2010. The following year a study circle was started and the first domestic community organising practices were launched. The CKA became the main engine of domestic community organisation (Sebály-Vojtonovszky 2016). In 2018 the ‘aHang’ (The Voice) campaign platform and its sister site ‘SzabadaHang’ (Free

41 https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/mun/hu/mun0073.html

42 <https://www.corganisers.org.uk/what-is-community-organising/>

Voice) were born, where anyone can start petitions and campaigns independently. Currently, nearly 5% of domestic internet users have joined the platform and become a shaper of Hungarian public life.⁴³ The team and members joined campaigns on many important issues and achieved changes – primarily at the local level. There are 106 campaigns on their website now (2022 autumn). Some of the campaigns are also supported by CKA's community organising programme or by the campaign service that has been operating since 2019. The latter was established by 'CKA', 'aHang' and 'Nyomtass te is!' community weekly with the aim of helping the protest campaigns of civil groups with professional and financial support.

Following the subsided protests waves of 1968, a new movement wave unfolded only at the turn of the millennium. The birth of the movement against neoliberal globalisation is linked to actions organised in connection with the World Trade Organization (WTO) summit in Seattle in 1999, but its antecedents include indigenous movements, fair trade and protest against the creation of MAI⁴⁴. The *alterglobal movement* organised into one coalition the new social movements of 1968 (greens, rights defenders, feminists), religious-charitable organisations, youth movements, the labour movement and indigenous movements of the Third World. A series of World Social Forums was launched starting in 2001 in Porto Allegre. European forums were also organised between 2002 and 2006. The Social Forum was a new formation, not a political actor, but a meeting point where movements and networks came together to learn from each other and to build together (Scheiring 2005). The global economic crisis contributed to the decline of the movement; however, some of its actors and demands were channeled into the mainstream decision-making processes. In Hungary, besides green organisations, Scheiring identified a few other Hungarian organisations as members of the alterglobal movement: the 'TASZ' (Society for Freedom – rights defender organisation), the 'Békejel' (Peace Sign- organisation for nuclear disarmament) and the 'Attac' (scientific and activist portal). The anti-globalisation agenda is also represented in Hungary by right-wing organisations (Mikecz 2020). In Hungary the protest movements related to the alterglobal movement were the demonstrations against the war in Iraq and the prevention of the installation of a NATO locator on Mount Zengő. The alterglobal movement had a relatively modest direct impact in Hungary, but the novel elements it brought in have spread here, too. Tarrow (2011) identifies the face-to-face electronic mobilisation, peaceful and violent performances, and more aggressive police responses as such. More and more protest campaigns use creative ideas and flash mobs. For example, the 'Eleven emlékmű' (Living memorial) flashmob was organised against a planned German occupation memorial,

43 <https://ahang.hu/rolunk/>

44 Multilateral Agreement on Investment

during which participants brought and shared souvenirs and their 'stories', thus setting up an alternative memorial. Mária Sándor, an activist nurse fighting for health reforms, once set up a tent in Budapest furnished with equipment from the 60s and 70s, which is still typical of today's hospital care. The 'MátészalkaLeaks'⁴⁵ group ran a race in snail costumes with vehicles of the Hungarian Railway Company, some of the protesters against the internet tax 'besieged' the headquarters of Fidesz, throwing old computer keyboards at the building.

The year 2011 was another milestone and source of inspiration in the history of social movements. The year began with the *Arab Spring*, with the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, which then spread like wildfire throughout the region. In Egypt's Tahrir Square something new was born in terms of the protest repertoire. The constructed tent city was not only the residence of the protesters, but also carried a political message, demonstrating the freedom that the protesters wanted to achieve. The participants organised the supply of food, water and electricity, established a hospital, organised concerts, exhibitions, cultural programmes and wrote new resistance songs. Inspired by the Arab Spring, tent cities were created in Madrid and in dozens of other Spanish cities, and their manifesto became the basis of the *Occupy movement*. The Indignados (Indignant) movement also strove to implement participatory democracy. The decision-making was based on forums operating with specific hand signals.⁴⁶ In one of these forums the participants agreed to dissolve the camp, because they realised that they had made the most out of the strategy they had followed until then. As a continuation the movement was localised (itinerant forums were started in the outer districts of Spanish cities) and globalised (an international day of action was announced). Later a similar occupation of streets or squares took place in 2,000 cities around the world, including New York, where the protesters occupied Wall Street. Characteristic of the movement was that the mostly middle-class activists invested energy in involving other social groups, as well. By the end of the year, the movement died down, but many 'spin off' movements were born from it, which provided specific solutions to emerging problems. As an impact of the movements of 2011 on Hungarian public life, solidarity demonstrations took place, including a large-scale, colourful demonstration using hand-signals. Later the HaHa ('Hallgatói Hálózat' - Student Network) spread the usage of hand-signals with the help of the Hungarian Occupy group. During the CEU demonstrations in 2017 the Oktogon Community (Occupy Oktogon) camped on Oktogon square and in 2018, CEU students occupied Kossuth Square

45 Mátészalka is a town in Hungary. MátészalkaLeaks is the name of a local activists' group.

46 'Hand signals are used instead of conventional audible signals, like applause, shouts, or booing, because they do not interrupt the speaker using the human microphone, a system where the front of the crowd repeats the speaker so that the content can be heard at the back of the crowd.' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_movement_hand_signals)

(Gláti 2021). Students occupied a university auditorium during the protests of 'Haha' and a whole building during the protest campaign of the SZFE.

Push factors causing protests

During the examined period, events and measures causing dissatisfaction and indignation (push factors) were practically continuously experienced in Hungary. There are several restraining factors which resulted in the absence or the low support of protest actions as well as the failure of the protest, despite high support.

Factors of pulling back the protests and demands

Economic prosperity is a pulling back factor of protests and demands. Their number may not, but their support will definitely be reduced as a consequence of the improving economic situation. An exception to this is the case of strikes, which are more common during periods of growth (Tarrow 2011), since employees are afraid of losing their jobs in an economic recession, and employers also have less scope to fulfill the claims. The 2010–2019 period started after the lowest point (2009) caused by the global economic crisis, and it showed a growth of 4% from 2014 (except for 2.1% in 2016), which was broken by the pandemic.⁴⁷

A number of measures (legislative changes) were aimed at curbing the protests, and during the period under review *the options for citizens' actions were narrowed* in the areas of requesting data of public interest, the exercise of the right to assembly and strikes.

It is a restraining force for protests when a more serious crisis occurs, which diverts attention and takes away resources. This is how COVID put an end to global climate protests and temporarily took climate change off the agenda. In 2020 the object of the protest actions also changed and most of the protests were related to the epidemic (epidemic management, epidemic rules, epidemic-related investments, public education issues during the epidemic).

There are also restraining factors among the global trends which affect civil societies: terrorism and the emergence of new authoritarianism. Authoritarian and hybrid regimes consider civil society as a threat due to its capacity to promote pluralisation and democratisation. Moreover, as Whitehead points out, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela have the resources to defend their positions. *Hybridising and authoritarian countries learn from each other* and use similar techniques to reduce the effectiveness of civil society in order to minimise the delegitimising and destabilising effect of the civil sector. They try to keep civil society within a minimal and controlled framework. With the

⁴⁷ https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_eves/i_qpt017a.html

help of legal means they stymie both the external funding of the sphere and the activities aimed at the empowerment of citizens. At the same time they build and strengthen their own domesticated civil society. It is also a typical method, which certain actors channel political debates into a legal path, and which is usually a slow and difficult process (Szabó 2015). It is also a common practice to label certain social groups as terrorists or foreign agents. These techniques appear in the case of Hungary as well, but in a more moderate and subtle form as the EU and NATO membership acts as a stabilising force. Regarding civil society, the illiberal Hungarian political system is restrictive but not oppressive (Szabó 2015). In Hungary, civil organisations are not banned (with the exception of far-right and paramilitary organisations) and activists and journalists are not imprisoned. When there was a legal process in connection with ‘Norwegian crime’, the authorities found everything in order and the case was closed. The legal provisions that made the operation of individual NGOs more difficult had no direct legal effect, such as the Hungarian regulations on NGOs supported from abroad or the special immigration tax levied on NGOs helping refugees.⁴⁸ In most cases, those involved did not meet the otherwise vaguely prescribed obligations.⁴⁹ However, organisations considered to be ‘Soros’ agents’ do not win funds (or do not even apply) in domestic tenders, and their partners withdrew from them in the case of tenders that had already been won. In the cases referred to the court a judgment is reached over the course of years, which thus has only a symbolic value. Branding NGOs as foreign agents or mercenaries of the opposition is an effective communication strategy, which is clearly shown by the fact that, according to USAID-INCL research, the public image of the sector has significantly deteriorated compared to 2010 (see Table 3).

Relational, cognitive and motivational mechanisms influencing protest movements

In addition to environmental and externally generated effects, political processes are determined by cognitive and relational mechanisms. The *relational mechanisms* are the coalition, organisational and network paths through which alliances can be formed (McAdam – Tarrow – Tilly 2002). Among Hungarian civil society organisations, with the exception of the greens, *coalition building* is not typical. In case of the environmentalists this is greatly helped by the system of national meetings organised every year since 1991.

Cognitive mechanisms include issues of collective perception and political commitment, the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance and cognitive libera-

48 XLI of 2018 act on the amendment of individual tax laws and other related laws, as well as on the special immigration tax

49 XLI of 2018 act on the amendment of individual tax laws and other related laws, as well as on the special immigration tax

tion, the way actors use words, objects and symbols, creatively changing and radicalising their meaning, and how they interpret events (McAdam – Tarrow – Tilly 2002). In the Hungarian movement culture, the use of *symbols* and special incisive words is widespread ('slave law', 'lex Soros', 'lex CEU', O1G,⁵⁰ white-red cordon tape, mask with the inscription 'freeSZFE', checkered shirt, black T-shirt, black umbrella).

Frame analyses serve to capture the cognitive processes taking place in social movements. Framing, i.e. giving subjective meaning, promotes the success of the movement if the frame resonates with the views held by a wider community, creating a connection between them and the movement. In this way, the movement is able to recruit supporters and demobilise some of the movement's opponents (McAdam et al 2002). Limitations to the successful resonance of the frame may be phenomenological factors, in connection with previous experiences and cognitive states (Snow-Benford 1992). For example, the framework of nuclear winter resonates well in the EU and Japan, where there was first-hand experience of the devastation of war. Since there is little direct experience regarding direct democracy in the Central and Eastern European region, Hungarian civil society can expect a low level of resonance (Mikecz 2020).

A possible way to increase resonance is to create a master frame that connects different frames. This process in other words is called frame integration, or alignment of the frames. This can be done in several ways. Frame bridging can be achieved by connecting ideologically coincident but structurally different elements. During frame amplification values and belief in victory can be strengthened. Frame extension means the inclusion of additional values, which can be used to gain followers, while frame transformation means the abandonment of incorrect, outdated elements and the inclusion of new values (Snow et al 1986). In Hungary the *extension of the framework* has become a common tool. The creation of the 'Milla' movement was triggered by the media law, but the movement initiated demonstrations on many other issues and also contributed to the founding of the 'Together 2014' electoral alliance. The molinos with the words 'Viktator',⁵¹ 'democracy', 'Europe', 'VAT fraudsters' and 'the basic law is invalid' also shouted by demonstrators during the protests against internet tax indicated that the demonstrators were not only dissatisfied with the law (MNO 2012). The actions against the 'slave law' also quickly took on the character of a general criticism of the system.

Cognitive liberation is the feeling that we can make a difference by what we do (McAdam 2013). Since more and more attempts to influence decisions are ineffective in Hungary, *apathy* increases and civil activity decreases or manifests itself in a negative way. Young people 'vote with their feet', i.e. they leave the

50 Abbreviation of a sentence scolding Viktor Orbán in the form of an acronym

51 Victor (the name of the prime minister) + dictator

country or they do not choose the teaching profession. The growing desire of young people to emigrate is not only a Hungarian characteristic. In addition to the desire for adventure, the fact that today's young people have better foreign language skills and more opportunities favours the emigration tendencies. At the same time in Hungary this is compounded by the limited opportunities for self-assertion and the negative perception of the processes taking place in the country (Pénzcentrum 2014). The role of the hundreds of thousands living abroad may be important in the future through the personal links between east and west. Easterners living in the west can initiate and support fundamental changes in the east (Cabada 2021 quotes Ágh 2019). The lack of teachers is an increasingly pressing problem in the Hungarian education system, universities cannot even start many teaching courses because there are so few applicants.⁵² As mentioned above, the salary of new teachers is low, and many university students say that they did not choose the teaching profession because of the low salary.⁵³ These examples of *negative activism* belong to *ordinary forms of resistance*, to the hidden, small-scale, but parallelly repeated actions of powerless groups, which add up in their effects and can have macro consequences (Tóth 2016), although in the aforementioned cases with negative ones.

In experienced societies an important *motivation* for actions is what experiences can be gained through them. In his book on political activism, Dániel Mikecz (2020) identifies among the ideal types of activism the experience-oriented, altruistic activism, during which political action is not aimed at specific policy decisions, but at the internal enrichment of the actor and the acquisition of experiences. Mikecz cites civil activism during the refugee crisis as an example for this.

The motivation to gain experience also appears in the case of other types of actions, i.e. actions that arise specifically with a demand. The feeling of belonging to the community, even if it is temporary, is an intense feeling that permeates the participants in the collective action. The community organisers consciously strive to ensure that the protesting group chooses forms of action that are enjoyable to perform. When collective action is unusual and surprising, it is, at the same time, a more effective tool for influencing decision-makers (Alinsky 1999).

People can gain experience and enrich their personality in *free spaces* (sequestered social sites, havens, spatial preserves), which are relatively open and participatory public spaces in the community, where individuals can learn new self-esteem, develop a deeper, assertive group identity, acquire community skills and civic virtues, and develop their cooperation skills (Evans-Boyte 1992). Free spaces give opportunities for demonstrating the socio-political system people consider ideal and at the same time they take small steps to change the world

52 https://eduline.hu/kozoktatas/20221005_tanarok_szama_9022. Ernőfy, 2022.

53 My own experience.

without taking power (Holloway 2010). There are permanent free spaces, for example ‘occupied houses’, feminist bookstores, community cafes – in Hungary you can find the latter form. There are spaces that temporarily become free space during protest movements, like Tahrir Square or the demonstration sites of the ‘Occupy movement’. A Hungarian example of this was when the group ‘HaHa’ occupied a lecture hall in 2013 during their protest movement due to the amendment of the Higher Education Act (MTI 2013). Later, in 2020, the protesting students of the University of Theater and Film Arts occupied an entire university building (Szabad Európa 2020).

It happens that a support event (e.g. concert, performance, exhibition, etc.) that provides experience is organised in connection with the protest, so people who do not chain themselves to the trees or move into the occupied building can also join. In Hungary this is still not widespread, but e.g. in April 2022, a solidarity concert was also connected to the teacher’s demonstration, where, in addition, the strike fund was supported by the proceeds of the participants’ tickets.

The element of experience is even more strongly present in the case of the ‘protestival’. These are protest events that, in their programme and appearance, are reminiscent of music and cultural festivals and art happenings. Pride and the festivals organised by the radical right are typical examples of these here (Mikecz 2020). And some festivals are not protestivals, but they also have a social mission and give place to programme elements related to social responsibility (e.g. O.Z.O.R.A., Valley of the Arts, Mediawave festival). The ‘Gyüttment’ festival, which has been organised since 2015, is a special annual gathering of people who start their life in the countryside anew and choose an environmentally conscious rural life and values. On these occasions knowledge is shared and experiences exchanged in a festival environment. Those who are interested can also try out some elements of an environmentally conscious lifestyle ‘in a small way’, since the organisers take care to reduce the environmental load during the organisation and implementation of the festival.⁵⁴

The tools of citizen activism can also be grouped according to how much *energy investment* is required from the actors themselves. The simplest action, we can call it the first level, is signing petitions. The next step is participation in demonstrations. Participation in the organisation of protest actions requires even greater commitment, time and energy. A specific type of action that requires a high level of motivation is the so-called prefigurative action, or ‘acting differently’. Young (2002) calls those forms of protest as movements of life politics. They rise above everyday political battles and unfold within civil society, combining the goal of personal and social change. In Hungary, conscious costumers and those who resart their lives in the countryside can be cited as examples of this type of action, and also the operators of open spaces.

54 <https://gyuttmentfesztival.hu/a-gyuttment-elindult-egy-uton/>

VII. Conclusion

In the study we reviewed the activities of citizens in Hungary which are somehow aimed at influencing decision-makers and ultimately changing the world around us. These activities range widely from individualised collective action to protest movements. Within the formalised segment of civil society certain types of organisations are of particular importance in protest actions and movements, such as confrontational and lobbying organisations. Watchdog and anti-corruption organisations operate in the country, they inform, sometimes they initiate legal actions and they make policy proposals, but their effect is small (see USAID-ICNL reports). In many cases, advocacy organisations take cases to international legal forums (e.g. criminalisation of homelessness, discrimination against certain churches, Central European University, etc.)

The policy-influencing activities of the civil society typically work in a way that when an organisation becomes active in a specific area (e.g. care and employment of the disabled, social integration of disadvantaged people, environmental protection, etc.) it simultaneously attempts to influence the related government policies. This has a narrow scope, as we mentioned earlier, but it occurs that the policy proposals of CSOs are implemented. Some of them are the result of silent, background processes, while others, as a consequence of spectacular actions, e.g. the movement regarding 'ápolási díj'/care fee (Sebály 2020).

The activities of groups concentrating on community organising can be said to fill a gap: they spread self-assertion methods and support the initiatives that have started. The role of trade unions has decreased as the opportunities for asserting labour interests have narrowed. Despite this, there are particularly active trade unions, such as the ones of teachers or railwaymen (Berki, 2019). Civil organisations with system-shaping objectives can be found in the Greens movement – as we well know – so far without results. And last but not least, there are active citizens who are initiators, organisers and participants in protest actions and movements. Their informal groups sometimes become formalised by transforming into civil organisations and parties. Some charismatic persons give a huge boost to movements, like Mária Sándor (Bíró 2015) in health care or Olivér Pilz (Népszava.hu 2022) in education.

We examined the possibilities of actions, the actual actions and effectiveness of the civil sphere, as well as the broader context of Hungarian civil society and social movements, the circumstances and events that act as pull, push or pull back factors. The question of whether citizens are powerless in Hungary's illiberal democracy cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Using the results of international research, we showed that in Hungary, citizenship activity is at a low level even in terms of the region. The viability of civil society is decreasing, especially in terms of financing opportunities, the legal environment, the image of the civil sphere and the ability to assert interests. We found that

between 2010–2022 the presence of grievances as triggers was constant in the country and the opportunity structures for action narrowed somewhat, but the illiberal Hungarian system is restrictive and not oppressive (Szabó 2015; Procházka – Cabada 2020). There is a way to protest, to act in a different way, and actions do take place. It is true that it is rarely possible to influence decision-makers – mostly in simple matters that affect everyone – but participating in the analysed movements and hearing about them also modifies individual and collective experiences and shapes the value system.

Social movements do not only fight for instrumental goals, but they also mobilise people, build organisations, contribute to self-development, form a collective identity and (re)socialise the participants. And these effects prevail even if the instrumental goal was not or only partially achieved. Let me mention one or two examples to illustrate this last statement. A community development process took place in a settlement without any particular results. A decade later, the same community became active when there was a plan to close the local school. Although they could not prevent the closure, a foundational school was created instead.⁵⁵ Or in the 2022 elections urban vote counting citizens assigned to rural settlements (and delegated by opposition parties) had an astounding experience meeting rural people, getting to know their world and their way of thinking.⁵⁶ These experiences (along with the election results, according to which the countryside proved to be a stable supporter of the government) resulted in the increased interest of these people (as well as in civil and political activists) in the countryside and made them reconsider how to address rural people.

Those who participate in a protest movement meet like-minded people, which confirms that they are not alone with their opinion. They also meet people who think differently, which prompts them to make an intellectual effort, to reconsider their views, which serves deeper understanding of the topic of the protest. During the process, people debate and decide, organise meetings and events, and cooperate with others. These activities induce civic skills and political efficacy. This is how participation in protest movements and actions becomes the school of democracy. Being active in movements builds social capital, which can be mobilised later. Those who stand up for a cause will be much better able to stand up for themselves, their assertiveness will develop. People like building things up together (beliefs and societies as well, not just physical things), like acting together. The pursuit of joint activity is a biological characteristic of our species claims the human ethologist Csányi (2020). Protest/demand movements (besides many other types of activities) provide space for exercising this urge. If the efforts are futile or mistakes are made during the process, these positive outcomes are still present. Failed protest movements are opportunities for

55 interview with a community developer

56 see e.g. the reports of the vote counters („Szavazatszámológépek beszámolója”) facebook profile

self-reflection, self-improvement and to correct mistakes the next time, thus realising learning by doing.

Of course, as we mentioned, the many unsuccessful actions and campaigns can lead to apathy. On the other hand, if citizens stop trying to influence their own lives, it strengthens the feeling of helplessness and vulnerability. From the point of view of the socialisation of the new generation it is extremely important whether children and adolescents see the movement activity of the civil society and whether they can get involved in such activities. If there is inherited and acquired helplessness, there may also be learned agency. Currently, the system of illiberal democracy is supported by a narrow majority of voters,⁵⁷ the proportion of indifferent or apathetic citizens is significant, so it is particularly important that the minority of those who act differently and think differently remain active and make their voices heard. The ‘power of the powerless’ (Havel 2011) consists partly in the fact that if society’s expectations of politics and politicians change, politics and politicians must change as well.

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⁵⁷ The two-thirds parliamentary majority in 2010 was due to the high support of Fidesz, but since then the cause of the two-thirds majority lies in the new system of the elections, which strengthens the advantage of the winner. Individual parliamentary seats can be won with even 30% of the votes in the first-past-the-post system. The electoral districts were also redrawn so that the votes of rural voters who sympathise more with Fidesz could offset the urban votes. Hungarians across the border have the right to vote, of whom an overwhelming majority is Fidesz voter.

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